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SUBJECT: LABOR STRIKES: GOE APPROACH UNSUCCESSFUL IN
STEMMING PROTESTS

REF: CAIRO 1283 AND PREVIOUS

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Unsanctioned industrial actions continue to spread throughout Egypt. The GOE thus far has chosen to deal with the various strikes on a case-by-case basis rather than pursuing a broader labor dialogue, a tactic that has been successful in conciliating some striking workers, but cannot address the larger issues of shrinking real wages, fears of privatization, and complaints of a union structure that does not represent worker interests. Although the overall economy has yet to be affected by the actions, increased or prolonged labor unrest could ultimately harm investment. There is a real prospect for increased strike actions in the coming months. End summary.

More of the Same

¶2. (SBU) Unsanctioned industrial actions, while still generally smaller than last December's textile strikes (reftel), continue to spread throughout Egypt. Over 500 workers at a Suez cooking oil factory went on hunger strike on May 22 after the factory owner threatened police action to break up a week-long sit-in protest. The factory workers are demanding increased pay and promised bonuses. A worker's sit-in at the Mansoura-Espana Garments Company is entering its fourth week, with 150 workers sleeping on the factory floors and relatives supplying food and water. In early May, over 3,000 workers from the public Transport Authority threatened a general strike demanding pay increases and better benefits, and briefly prevented buses from departing one of Cairo's major bus terminals. Approximately 1,000 workers from Cairo's Metro Authority (subway system) joined the threat of a general strike, although the Ministry of Transport negotiators were able to open discussions and avert the action. Egypt Air flight attendants have also threatened work action over pay and benefits.

GOE Approach Not Working

¶3. (SBU) Despite new and ongoing strikes, the GOE has thus far continued to deal with the various strikes individually,

seeking an appropriate blend of concessions and security force coercion to end the actions. The director of a leading Cairo-based human/labor rights NGO told Emboff that while he welcomes the direct intervention of the Ministers of Manpower (MOMM) and Investment in negotiating ends to the various strikes, the GOE's "case-by-case" approach will not end the strikes. The ongoing labor disputes will not be resolved, he says, until the GOE implements some specific mechanism, aside from the failing national union structure, to address worker demands across the economy. A local International Labor Organization (ILO) official told us that the GOE's "firefighting" approach is likely encouraging new strikes while at the same time sapping the attention and energies of the relevant ministries away from employment creation objectives.

14. (SBU) A senior official in the Ministry of Manpower told Emboff that while the ministry is seeking to engage all interested parties, including the unions, workers' representatives, factory management, etc. when a dispute arises, the ministry plans to maintain its "case-by-case" policy and does not see the need to engage in a broader social dialogue with workers. "If after our intervention the workers strike again," the official told us, "then we will realize it was not successful. But if there are no strikes, then they must be satisfied."

"Silly Groups"

15. (SBU) Although striking workers cite anger over paltry wages, shrinking benefits, unpaid bonuses, and fears of privatization as the root causes of the unrest, Secretary

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General of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF - Egypt's sole legal trade union federation) Ibrahim el-Azhary recently ascribed the disquiet to non-governmental organizations that wish to stir up trouble. He said in a recent press interview that these "silly groups" are not giving ETUF "a chance" to defend workers' rights amid claims that "they don't trust us." The Minister of Manpower has echoed el-Azhary's sentiments in numerous public statements.

MB Raises Voice

16. (SBU) The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) continues to seek to associate itself with the plight of workers, despite their traditional weakness among labor and the assertions from many striking workers that politics has no role in labor unrest. Peoples Assembly MB MP Abdul Halim Hilal submitted a formal written question to the Ministers of Manpower and Social Solidarity regarding the GOE's recent shuttering of the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS) (reftel). Hilal stated that the move was "in violation of international covenants" and "an attack on freedoms and civil society," and he called for an immediate reopening of the CTUWS to "help workers restore their violated rights."

Update on Mehalla Strike Leader

17. (SBU) Reftel reported on the emergence of Mohamed El Attar, leader of the December 2006 Mehalla textile strike, as a potential mouthpiece and leader of a broadening movement. The GOE apparently recognized him as such as well, and reports surfaced on May 14 that the GOE security services had ordered El Attar's employer to transfer him to a factory in Alexandria. According to statements by the 36-year old father of three made to leftist activist and blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy, El Attar said he refused to accede to his employers request to meet with security officers, saying that

"I will not negotiate with security. This is an unfair decree to punish me for standing up for my rights and the rights of my colleagues," according to el-Hamalawy.

18. (SBU) News of El Attar's planned "relocation" spread quickly among civil society activists, who organized a letter-writing campaign targeting the Prime Minister and Minister of Manpower and expressing solidarity with El Attar and other labor activists. His factory rescinded the relocation order the next day, and El Attar credited the vocal response from labor organizations and activists in Egypt and abroad for the GOE's about-face.

Comment

19. (SBU) The prospect for broader labor disturbances in the coming months is real. The grievances and strike threats of workers at Cairo's public flour mills could resurface in June as an interim agreement on the provision of flour to the mills expires. The GOE's efforts thus far have been successful in conciliating some striking workers in the various sectors, but the case-by-case approach has not addressed the larger, more fundamental issues facing Egypt's workers. Ascribing the unrest to "silly groups" will neither assuage the workers nor correct the underlying problems. Notwithstanding the continued volatility of the labor situation in Egypt, and the MB's attempts to cast itself as a defender of worker rights, we do not yet see any evidence that the strikers' economic demands have meshed with other political grievances against the GOE.
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